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CIA, NSA chiefs ask press cooperation

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The directors of the CIA and the National Security Agency shifted gears yesterday and appealed for news organizations to cooperate in efforts to stem intelligence leaks they claim have cost both human lives and billions of taxpayer dollars.

CIA Director William Casey and NSA chief Lt. Gen. William Odom, in a unique joint interview at CIA headquarters, played down their recent threats of criminal prosecution against news organizations and even backed off slightly from a warning they had issued only the night before to reporters covering the espionage trial of former NSA communications expert Ronald Pelton.

Mr. Casey, Gen. Odom and Mr. Casey's deputy, Robert M. Gates, agreed to the interview with The Associated Press, in Mr. Gates' words, "to lower the noise level, turn down the volume and have a serious dialogue."

"We haven't made ourselves always as clear as we might be," Mr. Casey said. "And I think that certainly the press has been very hysterical about the thing, saying we're trying to tear up the First Amendment and scuttle the freedom of the press. We're not trying to do that."

The intelligence officials appealed to reporters working on stories that involve intelligence-gathering techniques to call the CIA for guidance on which details might risk lives or compromise expensive information-gathering equipment.

"We're saying that you can write about the whole range of national security issues without revealing unique, fragile national intelligence sources," Mr. Gates said.

Mr. Casey added: "We will work with you on that line. I wish you'd make clear the narrow line we're treading here and the sensitivity we have to the broader rights and needs and contributions of the press."

Mr. Casey and Gen. Odom said they were led to take their extraordinary actions of the last several weeks because, Gen. Odom said, "A series of recent signals intelligence leaks over the last six months is the most serious we can remember in a long, long time."

Mr. Casey added: "Every method we have of obtaining intelligence — our agents, our relationships with other intelligence services, our photographic, our electronic, our communications capabilities — have been damaged. Every one of them has been severely damaged by disclosures of sensitive information that lets our adversaries defeat those capabilities and to literally take them away from us.

"This is costing the taxpayers billions and billions of dollars and, more importantly, ... [putting] our national security ... at risk. We can't permit this to continue. To do so would undercut our national security severely, our personal safety, hopes for arms control and our efforts to establish and maintain peace around the world."

Mr. Casey and Mr. Gates both said there were agents who had not been heard from after disclosures in this country. They declined to provide details.

Gen. Odom said he would recommend prosecution of journalists with "the greatest reluctance" and that the combination of the law and his oath to protect intelligence sources presented him with "a very uncomfortable dilemma."

A day earlier, Mr. Casey and Gen. Odom had cautioned reporters at the Pelton trial in Baltimore "against speculation and reporting details beyond the information actually released at trial."

Legal experts, inside and outside the government, quickly pointed out that the government had no power to regulate "speculation" by news organizations.

Although they complained about the criticism of their statement, both Mr. Casey and Gen. Odom tempered the remarks a bit yesterday.

"If I had it to do over again, I might not use that word," Mr. Casey said. "I might use extrapolation."

Gen. Odom added, "There's nothing in there that says we're going to try to prosecute anybody based on speculation."

They were asked why in the Pelton trial the government is attempting to protect information that is widely known to U.S. reporters and widely believed to be known to the Soviet Union — such as the wiretapping by U.S. agents of telephones at the Soviet Embassy here.

Mr. Gates responded: "How does any member of the press know what the Russians know? Does anyone in the media have any penetrations of the [Soviet] KGB [spy agency]? And they don't know the degree to which the information they provide amplifies on what a spy may have given, confirms what a spy may have given or updates what a spy has given up."

Gen. Odom added that the government was faced with the danger of giving up seemingly innocuous pieces of information "fact by fact until you cross through the line without ever knowing it, and the accumulation of facts adds up to a new body of information."

The officials were reluctant to provide publicly what Mr. Casey said were "dozens, even hundreds, of examples of damage from leaks."

He did say that after news organizations reported U.S. eavesdropping on a communication line in Beirut "that traffic stopped, undermining our ability to deter future attacks, which did occur."

Mr. Casey said providing examples was very difficult because it tended to confirm information for adversaries. He acknowledged, however, that any trial of a news organization would likely provide similar confirmation.

Thus, he said, a decision to go to trial would involve a difficult balancing of competing interests.

The officials said they also were attempting to curb leakers inside the government.